



An Excerpt from *Transformed by Adoption: The Spiritual Life of a Normal Christian* by David Christensen

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

We are the sum of our choices. We become what we decide to become. The Apostle Paul has been teaching us in Romans 7 and 8 that our default position in life apart from God is the flesh - our human nature, disposition or personality. Paul exhorts us not to walk according to the pattern of this human nature but to walk by the pattern of the Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is the only one who can overcome our human nature with its sinful habits. Does this mean that we sit back and wait for God to fix us? Do we just “let go and let God?” No. We are active participants in this process of spiritual growth. What is our role? We have already seen that we, in our own power, cannot overcome the flesh in us, so how do we participate in this process of spiritual growth? Paul tells us that we live in the Spirit by executing our habits of sin. We cannot eliminate the flesh, but we can live in the Spirit, and so execute the sinful habits that rise from our flesh.

I think that these 3 verses may be the most important verses in the Bible outlining our responsibility in the process of growing spiritually – the actual practice of sanctification. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones states it well.

It is here for the first time, in this chapter, that we come to the realm of practical application. All we have had up to this point has been a general description of the Christian – his character, his position. But now the Apostle has really come explicitly to the doctrine of sanctification. Here we are told exactly how, in practice, the Christian becomes sanctified. Or, to state it differently, here we are told in detail and in practice how the Christian is to wage the battle against sin, and especially as it tends to come to him, and to defeat him through his body. This is one of the chief problems of the Christian life.¹

As we shall see in these important verses, our job is to put to death – to execute – the practices of our physical bodies. These actions or practices are the habits of the flesh that we must execute, but we can only do so by the power of the Spirit. Spiritual growth can be painful and executions are not pretty. We must actively participate in the process by making specific choices about our lives. These choices are life and death choices. The choices we make are choices that lead to life or to death.

Living by our sinful habits leads to death (v. 12). When Paul writes that “we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” he literally says that we are not “debtors” to the flesh. The flesh is that complex set of characteristics that is our nature governed by sin. It is our personality as directed by sin. We are not debtors to this personality. We do not owe our human nature anything at all. We have been freed from that obligation. We do not have to do what our human nature tells us to do. When that temper wells up within us, we can say “no” to our human nature. We owe it nothing and do not have to indulge the temper at all. We were in slavery to sin before we became Christians. We were not free. Christ set us free from that slavery but if we choose to act according to the flesh then we are living on the path to death. Paul goes on verse 13 to tell us that, if we are living according to the flesh, we are destined to die, for the flesh always leads to death. The verb translated “destined” indicates a strong probability in the present or future. It is not destined as in fatalism but in likelihood. Living according to the flesh is the pathway to death, not eternal damnation but deathly results in life. Sinful habits always destroy our relationships and our opportunities. Sin kills.

Paul laid out an important principle back in Romans 6:16 regarding what takes place in our lives as we make choices. We become slaves to whatever we want the most in life. Whatever or whoever we present ourselves to becomes our master in life. If we give ourselves to money, then money becomes our master. If we give ourselves to another person, then that person becomes our master. If we give ourselves to drugs or alcohol, then drugs or alcohol become our master. We think that we are in control, but really we have become slaves of what we want. If it is sin, then we become slaves to that sin. If it is obedience to God, then we become slaves of God. We make the choice, but the results are clear – death or life.

We grow in righteousness or we descend into death. Death is the result of choosing to follow our sinful habits in life. The ironic truth is that what we think will bring us life only brings us death instead. Modern morality tells us that we should follow our feelings. Be what you want to be and do what you want to do. Assert yourself and grab for what you want in life. Modern morality tells us that you only really live when you grab for all that you can get. God says that what we think will give us life – if I could just have that person, job or experience then I would be really living it up – will actually bring us death in the end. When we open the doors to our sinful feelings, then we are really opening the doors to our own destruction.

After a final stop for fuel at St. Paul, a tiny island in the Bering Sea, Dave Rundall piloted his 92 foot fishing trawler “Arctic Rose” into the remote Zhemchung Flats in pursuit of more fish. She was last seen by her sister ship, “Alaskan Rose,” at 10 p.m. on April 1 before she moved out of sight. The fishing trawler sank at 3:30 a.m. on April 2, 2001 in heavy seas. No distress call was ever sent. An orbiting satellite recorded a ping from the locator designed to transmit when submerged, and the Alaskan Rose quickly moved to assist. By the time they arrived on the scene there was no sight of the boat. They found the body of Captain Dave Rundall floating in his red survival suit but no other person was visible. Fifteen people died in the tragedy making it the worst U.S. fishing accident in 50 years. Four months after the sinking the Coast Guard used a remote controlled

underwater camera to view the Arctic Rose sitting perfectly upright on the ocean floor 400 feet below. Everything was intact. The only sign of a problem was a water tight door that was left open. The Marine Casualty Board spent 2 ½ years investigating the accident and concluded that the boat capsized in less than 3 minutes, and flooding began in less than 8 minutes. The Marine Board determined that the cause was a left rear hatch which had been left open allowing seawater to flood the boat. They speculate that the inexperienced crew had probably opened the hatch for air as they worked in the hold below deck. The open door led to death for all of them in a matter of minutes.² Not all open doors are positive opportunities. Some open doors lead to death. When you follow your sinful feelings, you follow them into disaster.

LOT AND THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Choices can be a slippery slope. What starts out innocently enough can quickly turn deadly as we slide down that slope. Alcoholism starts out with one drink. The affair begins with a friendship. Compromising our values begins with a profitable business partnership. Lot in the Old Testament is a great illustration of the slippery slope. Abram and Lot came to a parting of the ways in Genesis 13. Lot “lifted up his eyes and saw” all the riches of the valley of Jordan life (Gen. 13:10). He saw the prosperity of cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. He did not see the wickedness that God saw because he did not see with God’s eyes. Now observe the slippery slope. Lot pitched his tent near Sodom (13:12). He was not in it. He was near it. Yet in the next chapter Lot was living in Sodom (14:12). Finally, by the time we get to God’s judgment of Sodom we read that Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom (19:1). He was a leading citizen of the city that God would judge. He was enmeshed in the politics and the prosperity of Sodom. The choice that started out as a good business proposition ended up in destruction. Lot will lose everything (except his two daughters) including his wife who couldn’t leave the lifestyle she loved. Lot didn’t start out to pursue sin but ended up in disaster.

I watch Christians today follow the same path to worldliness. It is easy for all of us to follow that path. We start down the path innocently enough. I have seen families get caught up in careers and possessions and lose their love for the Lord. What do you expect when you pitch your tent near Sodom? I have seen parents focus on the material success of their children instead of church and then the children don’t go to church any more. What do you expect when you pitch your tent near Sodom? I have watched young people grow up in church but like what they see out there in the world so much that they slowly walk away from the Lord. What do you expect when you pitch your tent near Sodom? Many Christians want to have their faith but get close to the world too. It is a slippery slope. How close is too close? We may not realize the danger until it is too late, and we wake up to spiritual disaster. What we think brings life actually brings death, and what we think brings death actually brings life.

Killing our sinful habits leads to life (v. 13b). It is vital to understand that we are responsible as Christians to put our sinful habits to death. We can’t do it by ourselves, but we can do it by the power of the Spirit living in us. God doesn’t do it for us. We have to do it. This is our responsibility. The word translated “putting to death” is used in the ancient literature especially of the work done by a public executioner. We are to execute the sinful habits in our lives. The old English used the word “mortify” so preachers in the past often talked about the “mortification of the flesh.” John Owen, the great Puritan preacher, said, “Mortification abates [sin’s] force, but doth not change its nature. Grace changeth the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of

sin...Do you mortify: do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”³ This is a biblical concept, but it is a doctrine that has been so misused and abused that many avoid talking about it today. Yet, I believe mortification of the flesh is the key to spiritual victory in our lives. Before I explain how we kill our sinful habits biblically, let me briefly address some of the false teaching that has developed in church history about the mortification of the flesh. I want you to understand what mortification of the flesh is not so we can understand and apply what it is.

WHAT MORTIFICATION IS NOT!

Mortification is not legalism. Legalism does not work as we have already seen in Romans 7. Legalism in its fullest form leads to a joyless, fear filled Christianity. It is morbid. Legalism produces Christians who develop martyr complexes – “look at poor me, I’m doing God’s will and you know I’m doing God’s will because of how miserable I look when I’m doing it.” Everything is duty and obligation. Happiness is the enemy of holiness. All fun is sin. Whatever makes me miserable must be God’s will. Legalism is three words – control, control, control!! I must control my flesh by the rigid application of duty and obligation. We have not the power in ourselves to control sin by the application of rules to our lives.

Mortification is not monasticism. There have always been those down through church history that have tended toward monasticism. Monasticism says that since the world is evil then we must renounce the world and everything in it. If we want to be spiritual, then we must separate from the world. We must avoid all contact and give up all the comforts and material possessions in this world. Monastics took vows of abstinence from money, possessions, marriage and many other worldly comforts in order to be spiritual. They falsely taught that this was what it meant to mortify the flesh. Be holy by avoiding all contact with outside temptations.

Mortification is not dualism. The third form of false teaching on this subject rose out of the philosophy of dualism. Dualism taught that the spirit is good but the body is evil so anything spiritual must avoid all the pleasures of the physical. They advocated starving the body through fasting and other vows of abstinence. Discipline the body through “flagellations.” In the extreme forms of dualism the people would beat or whip their bodies seeking to control the flesh and its sinful habits. The body is bad. The body is full of lust. It is our spirits that are good so drive out the lusts of our bodies through deprivation. Deprive the body of any enjoyment, pleasure or comfort so as to live the spiritual life.

These are abusive false doctrines, and Paul is not teaching us to mortify the flesh in these ways. Paul tells us that we will live if we are executing the practices of the body by the power of the Spirit. First we must note that we can only do this by the power of the Spirit. That is why Paul made it very clear that every Christian has the full power of the Spirit available to him for defeating the flesh. We have no excuse. We can kill the habits of the flesh. Paul is very clear that we are to kill the practices or actions of the body. The word “practices” is a word that is often used with bad things such as deceit or treachery. We must kill these sinful habits in our bodies. Why the body? We don’t want to fall into dualism here so we must be clear about Paul’s point. The body in and of itself is not evil but Paul is very clear that the body has not yet been redeemed. He tells us later in Romans 8:23 that the body will not be redeemed until the resurrection so until then our bodies are the places where sin is lived out. That is why the battle with sin takes place in our bodies and why

we must kill the practices of the body. We don't kill the body, but we kill the sinful cravings, habits and activities that use the body for their ends.

WHAT MORTIFICATION IS!

What does this mean? How does this work? Mortification means an execution of whatever (or whoever) is leading us to sin. The residual sin that still lives in our bodies must be executed. This is our job. Jesus made a powerful statement of this same doctrine in Matthew 5:29. He said: "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell." Do you want to live? You must kill whatever would lead you to death. You must execute it. Now Jesus is not talking literally here. This is figurative language that is deliberately brutal and bold. His point is not to mutilate your physical body. His point is to execute whatever in us leads us to sin. Sin becomes addictive. It begins to control our bodies. We come to crave the sin in our lives. If we are to gain victory over that sin, then we must brutally kill all parts of us that would crave the sin. If we like to gossip about our spouses or other people, then we must be brutal in eliminating that from our lives. If we have problems with lust, then we must cut out of our lives anything that would lead us to lust.

We are experts at rationalizing our sins. Our favorite tactics for dealing with sin are hiding, repressing or substituting. I see this many times in my responsibility as a pastor, but I see it also in myself. Sin is not executed in us by covering it up. Our fleshly inclination is to cover up our sin. We fear exposure and want to hide the sin from others. This will never do. Exposure of sin is the one weapon that works to kill sin. This does not necessarily mean public exposure, which is more like shaming than correcting in most cases. Exposure to a few mature Christians who will hold us accountable for the sin is one of the best weapons we can use to kill the habits of sin in our lives. Repressing sin is not killing sin either. Repressing sin is simply burying it deep inside of us until it rears its ugly head again in our lives. Legalism is mostly about repressing sin, but burying sin does not kill it. Sin is not executed by substituting one form of sin for another. Sometimes Christians faced with a specific sin stop that sin but substitute another less heinous form of sin in its place. This happens most often when we are caught in some sin. It is exposed and the sin goes "underground" in our lives to be replaced by something else. We can end up rationalizing sin away but fail to kill those sinful practices in our lives. The result is that they simply lie dormant for awhile only to rise up and bite us again later. Sin is never killed by hiding, repressing or substituting.

Sometimes I hear people pray something like this: "God I can't control this sin in my life. I've tried so hard to get rid of it. Please God take this sin out of my life. Remove this craving from me." Do you understand that the Bible never teaches us to pray that prayer? God can remove such sinful cravings and habits but he rarely does. Most often God tells us: "Look, I've already given you the power to remove that sinful habit from your life. You kill it." We, as Christians, have no right to say, "I am so weak. The temptation is just too powerful for me. Poor, poor me. I'm such a victim."

The Bible's answer is: STOP IT! If you have a problem with dirty jokes and crude talk, the Bible tells you to stop doing it. If you have a problem with alcohol or drug addiction, the Bible tells you to stop it. Cut it out of your life. If you have a problem with pornography, the Bible tells you to kill it. The pornographer must take steps to kill the sinful habit by removing the computer from the house or giving his/her spouse the password control. He must not go near any place that sells

pornography. Don't even go down the same street if you can avoid it. The alcoholic must stay out of bars and remove all alcohol from his home. He must join AA or some other 12 step program and get straightened out. We are not cured from these sinful cravings, but we must kill them by the steps we take. An execution is not pretty. It is brutal and harsh. An execution is painful, but we must cut out of our lives the sinful habit. Don't go near that person or place of sin. Eliminate that from your life.

We kill the sinful habits in our lives if we stay away from dangerous people. Paul wrote: "And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even reprove them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them (sons of disobedience) in secret." (Eph. 5:11-12) Peer pressure is powerful, and it is not just for young people. The friends we hang around with will influence us for better or for worse. We are not to leave this world because we are to be witnesses, but we will encounter in our lives people and situations that are dangerous to us. Get away from them. Cut them out of your life. Period!

We kill the sinful habits in our lives if we discipline our bodies for good. "Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:26-27) We don't literally abuse our bodies. Paul is talking figuratively here of how we need to discipline our desires so that we don't live our lives seeking to indulge our bodily passions which disqualifies us from serving God.

We kill the sinful habits in our lives if we don't give opportunity to the flesh. "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." (Romans 13:13-14) Make no provision for the flesh. Don't set yourself up with opportunities to fall. Don't put yourself in places and situations where you will be prone to sin. We are told to "flee immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18). Each of us has different issues with sin so my temptations are different than yours. What will be a problem for me may not be a problem for you and vice versa. You must not make any provision for those places where you are weak. If you do you are setting yourself up for sin. Stay away. Stop going there. A Danish proverb says: "No one can be caught in a place he does not visit."

HOW DO I KNOW I AM A NORMAL CHRISTIAN?

How do I know that I am a son of God? We could ask the same question another way. How can I know that I am a normal Christian? Paul lays out the sequence in reverse order in verse 14. I know I am a Son of God – a normal Christian - because I am led by His Spirit. "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God." The verb translated "being led" is in a form that indicates this leading is ongoing and continuous in our lives. We are developing new habits as we follow the Spirit of God. The habits of holiness gradually replace the habits of the flesh as the Spirit of God convicts us of sin, and we choose to obey Him in cutting those sinful habits out of our lives. The only way to be led by the Spirit is to obey the Spirit. A child is led by the father when he obeys the father. This is no mystical "second blessing" experience but an ongoing daily process of following what the Spirit of God tells us to do.

The Bible commands us, "Do not be drunk with wine for that is dissipation but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). The Higher Life Movement spoke often of the filling of the Spirit as a

repeated and repeatable experience. I picked one of many books on my shelf written by Keswick teachers who all write in a similar fashion about this experience of filling. Ruth Paxson, a well known teacher in her day, wrote:

My friends, to be filled with the Spirit is God's standard for every Christian here these afternoon. Are you filled? The only normal Christians here are those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. We sometimes think this is such an extraordinary spiritual experience that the person, who is so filled, is abnormal. It is the exact contrary. I put it to you today, is it normal for one who is in Christ and has Christ in him and who is indwelt by the same Spirit that indwelled Christ, to be constantly defeated?⁴

The answer is "no" of course. The normal Christian life is lived in the Spirit. Unfortunately, the Keswick teachers like Ruth Paxson described the filling of the Spirit in almost mystical terms. We need to prepare for the filling of the Spirit through total consecration of our spirits to His Spirit. We need to clean out unconfessed sin and yield every part of our inner being to Him. We need to "thirst" after the Spirit, and, finally, we need to accept Him into our lives by "drinking" deeply of the Holy Spirit.⁵ This teaching led, perhaps unwittingly at times, to a quest for a spiritual experience of the higher life that was almost mystical. How do I know when I have yielded enough to receive the Spirit? How do I know when I am thirsty enough? How do I know when I have drunk deeply of Him? Such a mystical passive experience of receiving or drinking deeply is not what Paul describes in Romans 8:13-14.

Paul does not even mention the "filling of the Spirit" in these important verses regarding sanctification, not because it is not important, but because he is describing the same experience in a different way. Being led by the Spirit is the same as being filled with the Spirit. Far from a passive mystical experience, it is simply the process of obeying what the Spirit tells us. We can be led no other way than through obedience to Him who leads. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit which means it is our responsibility to be filled. We are to obey the Spirit of God, and that is how we are filled on a moment by moment basis. We are being led by the Spirit as we are obeying the Spirit. John Owen wrote:

He doth not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience. The Holy Ghost works in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free obedience. He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences, and affections, agreeably to their own natures; he works in us and with us, not against us or without us; so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself.⁶

How do I know I am led by the Spirit of God? I am continuously killing my sinful habits by His power. I am choosing to obey Him. A biblical principle is to starve the wrong feelings and feed the right ones. Cut out of your life the wrong activities and habits. Be brutal about it, if you have to, but cut it out. Then fill your life with the good and righteous things of God. We become slaves of what we give ourselves to serve. The Spirit helps us kill the old habits and create new habits, but the process of forming habits is an ongoing daily process of making choices.

Years ago we visited Rome with our girls and two other families. We walked around the ruins of a great civilization on a very hot day. We admired the glory of what once was the greatest

city in our western world. Rome was once the most powerful nation on earth, but she fell from the inside out. Now only the symbols of past glory remain to remind us of her power. The same is true for us spiritually. We too can fall from the inside out, destroyed by our own lusts. I read the stories in the Bible and I am struck by how often our great heroes of the faith fell into sin later in life. David, Solomon, Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Josiah – to name but a few of the kings – all started well and did much good for God but failed in the second halves of their lives. The warning is important for all of us. We are all, no matter how high we climb for God, capable of the worst sins imaginable because the flesh lives on in each of us. None of us are exempt from the fall if we give in to the sin within. We must always remain on alert and seek to obey the Spirit's leading by killing the sinful habits that can develop in our lives. We must all work with the Spirit to put into practice new habits throughout our lives or we too can fall from within.

On April 20, 2010, the Macondo well in the Gulf of Mexico exploded and sank to the bottom of the ocean killing 11 of the 126 workers on the oil platform and causing an oil spill that took 87 days to get under control. The oil spill was an environmental and economic disaster of epic proportions for the entire Gulf Coast region. A joint task force of the Bureau of Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement and the Coast Guard released their 500 page report in the fall of 2011 detailing the problems they had found. They concluded that British Petroleum took many shortcuts because they were weeks behind schedule and tens of millions of dollars over budget. The Deepwater Horizon drilling rig failed because of weak cement at the base of the 18,000 foot well. The cement casing failed to contain the oil and gas which led to human and mechanical failures causing the giant eruption and resulting explosion. "The loss of life at the Macondo site on April 10, 2010, and the subsequent pollution of the Gulf of Mexico through the summer of 2010 were the result of poor risk management, last-minute changes to plans, failure to observe and respond to critical indicators, inadequate well control response and insufficient emergency bridge response training by companies and individuals responsible for drilling at the Macondo well and for the operation of the Deepwater Horizon," the report concluded.⁷

The reason for failure in our spiritual lives is the same. If we take shortcuts in our spiritual lives, we will face disaster. If we don't prepare by getting the proper training in God's Word, we will face spiritual disaster. If we are not vigilant and alert to the warning signs of sin, we will face spiritual disaster. If we do not take the flesh seriously so as to maintain healthy risk management procedures in our lives, we will face spiritual disaster. If we minimize the power of sin in our lives and pretend that we can overcome anything, we will face spiritual disaster. We need to take spiritual threats seriously if we are to be victorious in our lives.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans: The Sons of God, Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, p.92.

² Mike Carter, "Arctic Rose report may have lasting impact on fishing," The Seattle Times; "The Mystery of the Arctic Rose, Crew's Letter tell of Fishing Boat's Final Voyage," www.abcnews.com, June 27, 2013, original story aired on Feb. 7, 2002, ABC News Internet Ventures.

³ John Owen, "The Works of John Owen," 16 volumes, 1967 reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1853, 6:177, 6:9. Cited by John MacArthur Jr., "Mortification of Sin," The Master's Journal, 1998, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 1994, p. 4.

⁴ Ruth Paxson, Called Unto Holiness, Moody Press, 1936, p. 70.

⁵ Paxson, p. 95.

⁶ John Owen, "Works," 6:20, cited by MacArthur, "Mortification of Sin," p. 19.

⁷ John Broder, "BP Shortcuts Led to Gulf Oil Spill, Report Says," The New York Times, September 14, 2011.

